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ABSTRACT

English instructors try to convince students, sometimes in vain, of their need to learn composition. Through the use of counseling techniques, it is in the instructor's hands to build relationships with students that empower them as individuals and make them want to write well. First, an instructor can build trust by fulfilling promises and assuring students that nothing negative or demeaning will be said about them. Second, by reversing roles with students, instructors can empower students as authors; a simple repositioning of body posture can convey to a student that they share authority in a student-teacher conference. Third, since the comfort zone varies from person to person, an instructor can be sensitive to a student's need for space during conferences. Fourth, by mirroring the student's body posture, instructors may become more aware of that student's emotional state than they would be otherwise. Fifth, by responding to questions with apt questions or by waiting longer than usual for answers, an instructor may help students to generate their own thinking. Sixth, instructors can help students to recognize themselves as strong writers through three techniques: validation (offering compliments about a student's writing), use of positive dominant thought (sending students positive messages about their abilities), and grounding (touching the student lightly when making an important point). Finally, it is most important that an instructor assume enough control and set up enough structure to assure students that the environment is safe enough to take risks. (TB)

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Motivating Students to Change: Intensive Short Term Counseling Techniques Enhance Teaching of Composition

Most students who take freshman and sophomore English courses do so in order to fulfill core requirements for a degree. Their shared objective is to complete the course. The instructor's course objectives usually aim toward having students learn something--like how to write an interesting description or a sound argument. The discrepancy between the goal of the instructor and the goal shared by the majority of her/his students is similar to the discrepancy between the objective of an addictions counselor and that shared by most of her/his clients. Addicts usually seek treatment in response to pressure imposed by the spouse who threatens to leave, the judge who threatens to imprison, or the boss who threatens to fire. The treatment process is aimed at helping the addict to take ownership of a choice to adopt a clean/sober lifestyle. Individuals change behaviors more quickly and maintain the behavioral changes more consistently if they recognize desired personal rewards by making those changes. Techniques used by addiction counselors to motivate clients to invest in their own continuing recovery can be adopted by the teacher of college composition. The techniques motivate students to invest in learning to write well.

Why would a civil engineering major or a biology major want to write well? English instructors know the answer to that question. We try to convince students--all too often in vain--of their need to learn composition. Lectures pinpointing the writing tasks required of engineers and researchers, quotations of the high wages sometimes paid to people who can write well, even examples of embarrassing, poorly written publications usually fail to make students feel a personal need to begin writing well. Why?

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Human beings, especially young human beings, respond to immediate rewards or consequences better than they respond to deferred gratification or punishment. Students cannot generally picture themselves writing as part of a career. Rewards or consequences for strong or weak writing need to be more immediate for students to respond to them. Using methods effective in helping addicts to change lifestyles, English instructors can make students want to learn the craft of writing for their own reasons. Not all of those reasons need to be consciously recognized by students to affect them. The emotional fulfillment a student experiences in relationships with his/her instructor and classmates is a reward that will motivate almost every student. Building relationships that are meaningful to students and creating an environment in which students feel free to take the risks that eventually pay off in feelings of fulfillment can be done through the use of specific techniques.

An instructor can build relationships that empower individuals to write well. Just as the child who knows he or she can run back to the safety of a parent's arms, if needed, is more willing to try new activities, the student who feels safe with and accepted by an instructor is more willing to play with new ideas and techniques. Sections of English, in virtually all institutions, are small enough to allow instructors to know students on a personal level. Since the relationship built with a student outside the classroom will positively influence a student's behavior in the classroom, we owe it to ourselves to schedule individual conferences with students. We need to use the earliest conferences to build a human relationship, not necessarily discuss writing. The student who recognizes a personal relationship with the instructor will want to write well and will show increased responsiveness in class, actually carrying some of the teaching load. So the time invested in mandatory individual conferences pays off in the classroom as well as in individual student learning.

In the mandatory individual conference, instructors may use nine counseling

techniques that help build strong relationships and help students improve their writing. **TRUST BUILDING** establishes the foundation of an influential relationship. The most basic technique for building trust--doing what you say you are going to do--can be supplemented by another behavior that most instructors practice: ensuring that nothing negative or demeaning is ever said about any student--named or not--in another student's presence. Students build trust in instructors they observe to be consistently respectful of students. The first time a student hears or overhears an instructor make a negative or judgmental comment about any student, the trust is violated. The student who hears such a comment assumes that the instructor will make similar negative comments about him or her. He or she will not take the risk of sharing thoughts about which he or she is unsure--frequently a student's most creative thoughts.

By keeping our mouths shut at the right times, we can become privy to some of our students' most creative thinking. As they share their thoughts, we can reinforce their authority as writers. By **REVERSING ROLES** with students we meet in conference, we empower students as authors. Relatively simple behaviors accomplish enough of a reversal in roles to make a student comfortable taking the lead in an examination of his/her writing. Asking permission to look at the writer's work, physically positioning oneself in a way that establishes a peer dynamic, and deferring to the writer as the authority on her/his piece will move the instructor out of a role in which he or she can inhibit or intimidate a student and into a role in which he/she encourages the student to take the initiative and responsibility in regard to his/her writing. The simple movement from behind a desk to the side of a student helps to establish a peer dynamic.

As we work with students, we need to **BE SENSITIVE TO THEIR NEEDS FOR SPACE**, since the comfort zone varies from individual to individual. Eighteen inches is the

average amount of space an American needs when conversing in a setting that is not intimate. When two people look at one written page, they are necessarily closer than eighteen inches. It is essential to respect the needs of the other person in that space. We can feel out the space needs of individuals by mirroring their behavior. If the student moves back slightly, we move back slightly. If the student moves in, we move in a little bit.

The technique of **MIRRORING BEHAVIOR** can help us do more than establish the comfort zone of the individual with whom we work. Sometimes it can cue us in on emotions and attitudes that are not obvious to us. When we adopt the same posture we see our student take when he/she makes a statement, we receive cues from our own bodies about the emotions experienced by the other person. Try a variety of postures and experience the subtle manner in which they influence your feelings. The postures associated with different feeling states are common enough to different human beings that we can "read" others with a modicum of accuracy by "reading" ourselves.

We also need to work at reading the student on more than a surface level. Students frequently pose specific questions about an essay, questions we might find easy to answer. **RESPONDING TO QUESTIONS WITH APT QUESTIONS** is an essential method for helping students to generate their own thinking and explore it. Often a student will already have a fine idea in mind, one that may be superior to the one we would offer. Something like, "Should I reorganize the ideas?" Is usually best answered with something like, "What do you think about that?" If a student does not have an idea in mind already, allow him or her a moment to think about it. The minute or two that we wait often reward us by making us an audience to surprising and delightful creations.

Waiting, **LISTENING, FOR PERIODS OF TIME LONGER THAN IS USUAL** in western cultures, is a powerful tool. Alaskan Native peoples tend to practice the behavior

of listening so well that often, in groups of mixed cultural make-up, they don't get a chance to speak. However, they do come away retaining more information about what transpired during a meeting than most of us would. They don't wait for a chance to speak, ideas already in mind, the way we often do. They actively listen to others, taking time to think about what has been said after the other person stops talking. Then they respond after the other person has indicated it is their turn to speak--with a nod or some other subtle gesture. As a counselor raised with the behaviors common to western cultures, who has now spent fifteen years learning how to listen from Athabascans, Inupiat, Yup'ik, Aleut, and other Alaskan people, I can gauge the value of waiting longer than the "normal" amount of time before responding. We can reap a wealth of ideas. In interactions with Alaskan Natives and people from cultures where real listening is practiced, we get to hear ideas other than our own. In interactions with people from the dominant culture, our passivity prompts those we converse with to speak more than they usually would. They feel uncomfortable with the silence and jump to fill it. Sometimes this is when we become privy to the thoughts they might not expect to share, risky thoughts that are frequently at the heart of good writing.

Three techniques as powerful as active listening, for helping students to recognize themselves as strong writers, are **VALIDATION, USE OF POSITIVE DOMINANT THOUGHT, AND GROUNDING. VALIDATING** a writer's good ideas is probably most commonly used by teachers of composition. We know how important it is to recognize to a student her or his strengths in writing. Students are not always aware of that which they have done well, and sometimes they won't do it again if it's not pointed out to them.

Use of **POSITIVE DOMINANT THOUGHT** moves a step beyond validation and utilizes the powerful motivation found in the unconscious. It's simple, yet extremely effective. Most teachers may understand it in the context of the concept of "role fulfillment"

which we learn about in basic psychology and sociology courses. The reason that use of positive dominant thought moves beyond validation as a technique for helping students to write well is that the unconscious mind does not differentiate between what is true and what is not true. It simply uses its immense power to make its owner do whatever it has been told the owner does. So the simple statement, "You can do this," may be one of the most wonderful things a teacher could say to a student. Each of us has experienced the power of positive dominant thought in one form or another, whether we know it or not. The person who goes on a diet and decides "not to eat" usually ends up eating around the clock. The dominant thought that has been introduced to the unconscious mind is "eat." Smokers who have decided to "stop smoking" may light cigarettes end to end all day, wondering why they are smoking even more than usual. The dominant thought that has been introduced is "smoke," and that's just what we'll do. So next time we decide to lose weight, we may want to tell ourselves that we are very active physically and burn far more calories than we take in. To quit smoking, we may want to tell ourselves that we are nonsmokers with pink, clean, healthy lungs that have a huge vital capacity. The degree to which we forget to eat or smoke is amazing. We can invoke the unconscious motivation of our students--our writers: If we note a strong transition a student has made, even if we think it's an accident, we can say, "You write strong and creative transitions," pointing out the qualities of the good transition. That student will adopt the ability to write strong transitions and continue it.

GROUNDING is a method used to imbed a thought in a person's memory. It is accomplished with the power of human touch. The optimum time to use it would be the moment that we deliver a message of validation. By lightly tapping the outside of a student's upper arm with the backs of our fingertips, we can ground, through touch, a message such as, "You write great conclusions." Such a gesture is not likely to be misread as sexual.

However, it's important to judge whether to use any kind of physical touch by utilizing a screen of sensitivity to the emotional make-up and perceptions of individual students. A smile, a delighted expression, a warm tone of voice are alternatives methods for helping students to remember a statement, but none is as powerful as touch.

The positive helping relationships we build with individual students transfer to the classroom, making us more effective in indirect ways. Students who are aware of having received personalized caring help from an instructor in conference are going to be more responsive in the classroom, more apt to volunteer information and ideas, more apt to work positively in group activities. We can use group counseling techniques to generate an atmosphere charged with energy devoted to learning.

New behaviors, whether they include hard-earned skills of living clean and sober or the hard-earned skills of writing well, are adopted under the influence of relationships. Human beings respond positively to the influence of individuals that they know care about them. We are even more strongly influenced by groups to which we belong. A group, unlike a mere class, becomes an entity with inertia. We can reference the influence of peers on adolescents or the influence of chemical dependency recovery groups on recovering addicts as examples that show the power of the group.

Having the advantage of teaching a section that enrolls a workable number of individuals, the composition teacher may use some simple methods to make a class into a group geared toward personal growth. The length of the average semester, thirteen to fourteen weeks, equates with the length of a short-term outpatient treatment program. It is the perfect amount of time needed to have a group cohere, generate behavioral changes in the individuals belonging to it, and disband.

The skills required for an instructor to create a group are not easily practiced by

instructors who have a strong need to have students "like" them. A close-knit group is formed under pressure, and the instructor is responsible for providing that essential pressure. Not all students "like" being required to attend all classes, arriving punctually and staying for the entire class period--though many good students tend to express gratitude when such structure is provided. Naturally, consequences of significance must be imposed in order to get all of our students to comply with a strict attendance policy. On one level, such a policy improves dynamics between students who are asked to interact with each other in dyads, small groups, or the class as a whole simply because all students are likely to be present to follow through with assigned tasks. The obstacles to planned lessons which arise when students don't show up are avoided. On another level, the authoritarian pressure to attend class causes students to experience a kinship with each other--a kinship not unlike that observed in platoons of marines or flights of airmen. Individuals begin to think and work as a team.

Having prompted the formation of a team, we need to help its members learn to work together. Another authoritarian behavior helps to create the level of safety necessary for students to take risks--in expressing opinions or sharing experiences--that help to create a productive classroom atmosphere. The instructor needs to impose a set of rules that guarantee that students' ideas will be listened to with respect by class members. To accomplish this, the instructor needs to be willing to put a stop to spontaneous private conversations that occur between individual students, and which might seem fairly harmless. Most human beings do not take the risks of verbalizing opinions they know are controversial if there is a chance they will be ridiculed. One student, observing an unheard tete-a-tete between two other students, may think she or he is the object of discussion. The discomfort that accompanies such a perception is enough to discourage a student from volunteering

his/her thoughts. Students are not generally disturbed by disagreement that is expressed directly to them. By establishing, from the beginning of the semester, that all comments are welcome in front of the class as a whole, and that students who make comments in asides will consistently be invited to repeat their remarks for the whole class, an instructor can create a safe environment. This is most effectively done in a friendly tone and a manner that evokes acceptance. That way we can avoid the danger of coming across like a prissy school teacher. We gain the added delight of becoming privy to many good-humored jokes that students would normally reserve for each other. It's fun.

A group of individuals that knows the structure within which it operates, that can rely on consistent reinforcement of guidelines, and is pressured to perform develops group cohesion. Individuals move into roles that compliment each other. An instructor that recognizes the informal leaders in a group can adopt them as allies by treating them with respect. Informal leaders tend to influence the behavior of a group to a greater degree than a formal leader can. People follow informal leaders because they *want* to. An instructor that can harness the motivation that goes with desire has a powerful force working for her/him. We need to be alert to the way our class responds to individuals within it. The one who evokes laughter or controversy is often the informal leader. Listening actively to his/her opinions or appreciating his/her jokes--behaviors it pays to use with any student--can win an informal leader to our cause.

A complimentary relationship between instructor and informal leader generates an atmosphere that energizes other members of the class. As they begin to interact spontaneously, the instructor becomes a facilitator responsible for maintaining a respectful balance. We need to learn to confront comments that lean toward becoming disrespectful, in a kind way. In a courses that focus on argument, discussion can grow heated when an

instructor allows the class to discuss issues in which they have emotional investments. This semester, a young woman who got carried away in a discussion of gender issues made a snide remark about men. My softly delivered comment, "That was a stab," accompanied by an expression that showed my discomfort, was enough to prompt her to examine her own remark again. She apologized to her classmates almost immediately, but she spoke because she cared about the impact and the inaccuracy of her remark, not simply because she had been corrected. She operates from a feeling of responsibility to her classmates.

How does an emotional responsibility translate into good composition? In a setting in which respectful interaction is reinforced, individuals are able to take increased risks, sharing opinions in which they are emotionally invested. That, in turn, generates a more genuine and active discussion in the class. When students leave the room at the end of the hour, still debating as they walk down the hallway and out of the building, we can be assured that they are interested in the topic. They are not performing for the sake of the instructor. Since writing is thinking, class interaction that heightens interest and involves more active thought is likely to lead to writing that has more thought invested in it.

After a class discussion in which the class divided itself onto opposite sides of an issue, last semester, a student declared that he would write a paper showing why he was right. Then he said, of his writing, "I know what I want to say, but I can never get the right words." That student was primed for learning "the right words," and he improved his writing significantly. It's easy to teach word choice and writing conventions to a student who wants to learn them. Getting a student to *want* the information, having a student *want* to invest the energy in rewriting until a message is effectively delivered, is the commodity that is rare. By generating and using the power of a group, we give ourselves that gift.